

BY JIM CARROLL



Personal television

YOU - YES, YOU - ARE ABOUT TO BECOME A TV STATION

As the end of the 20th century draws near, lists abound. You've seen them - they outline the most significant events of the last 100 years, the most important people, the greatest books and movies, the best films, the silliest predictions. They are all quite subjective, of course, and based strictly on opinion. They spur a lot of discussion and cause some ►

people to get into raging debates. A peculiar activity, we might suppose, heightened by the fact that we are not only closing out a century, we are also closing out a millennium.

Many of these lists try to identify the most significant inventions of the century, and detail a wide variety of differing technologies: computers, antibiotics, telephones, the automobile, the Internet.

Obviously, there is no definitive answer, but I am prepared to offer you my own opinion, based on the simple fact that Statistics Canada tells me that I will devote a full one-seventh of my entire life to it.

The television.

YESTERDAY

Early in the 20th century, some scientific minds were already speaking of "pictures that could fly through the air." And when movie theatres started to offer "talkies" in the 1920s, their customers' natural reaction was, "Why can't we have radio with pictures in our homes?"

World War II delayed the introduction of television – but, once introduced, sets were then produced with a vengeance. Never mind that they had a tiny, fuzzy screen that could barely be seen: this was a revolution in the making, and they flew off the shelves. Only 2 per cent of US households had a TV in 1949; that had grown to 64 per cent by 1955.

Then, with the introduction of the VCR in the 1960s, TV acquired a whole new role: suddenly, it was possible to watch Hollywood movies in the comfort of your living room! Very few homes had VCRs in 1970, but by the mid-'80s, two-thirds of all homes had the device.

TODAY

There are now over one billion TVs worldwide. Do sheer numbers make this the most important invention of the century? Not at all – there are also one billion telephones. Today, some 98 per cent of homes in North America boast at least one television, and it's common to have more. But there are lots of telephones, too: many people have an office telephone, a cellphone and more at home.

So why is television more important? Because its use is more widely dispersed around the world. While many people outside of the industrialized nations lack their own telephone, they do have their own TV set.

And people watch them – a lot. One recent survey indicated that 40 per cent of Canadian families regularly watch television during the evening meal. What are we watching? An ever-growing number of channels whose content never seems to satisfy our desire for more. Bruce Springsteen captured our collective frustration with television when he recorded his song about the 57 channels that had nothing on. ▶

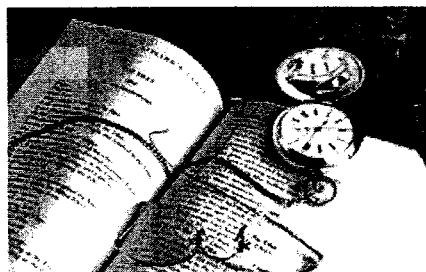
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TOMORROW

What is the future of television? Will it continue to capture so much of our time?

Some have suggested that with the emergence of cable and satellite, we're in the midst of a headlong rush to the "500-channel universe." With more channels, the argument goes, we are doomed to waste more time.

Then there is the current hot buzzword, "convergence" – a phrase that suggests the merging of television with computer technologies. Different people have different visions of how that merger will play out, however. Bill Gates seems to want us to spend our time in front of an interactive television, while the Internet industry hopes we will veg out in front of a computer screen that incorporates television access.

I, however, believe that the future of television will not be determined by

either of today's warring factions. Instead, its future will be shaped by folks like you and me. Why? Because I am convinced that we are now being handed the technologies that will soon allow us to establish our own television stations, and broadcast to a global audience. And leading us to this state of affairs are the yottabit and the digital video camera.

First, the yottabit. This term describes the huge volumes of information that will be carried through the fibre optic Internet of the future. Organizations such as Nortel now like to boast that they are in the business of manipulating photons (the tiny subatomic particles that make up light) through fibre optic lines. They are already capable of sending eight million telephone calls, or hundreds of video signals, through one tiny little strand of optical fibre the diameter of a human hair. Given that the Internet is being mar-

ried to fibre optics quicker than you can say Jetsons, and that some 80 kilometres of new fibre optic line is being laid in the ground every hour of every day, we can conclude that we will soon be able to send and receive a lot of information, including video, through the Internet.

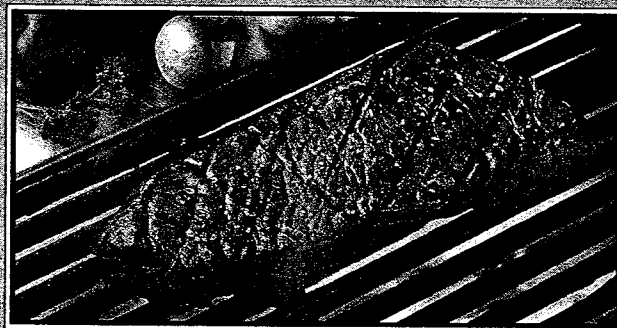
Second, consider the new device that Sony has dubbed the "digital Handycam." It seems like a camcorder, but it is really a computer that shoots movies. With this kind of device and some PC technology, you can film a home video, transfer it to your PC, do a bit of editing, add some special effects and create a "show."

You can then make it available to a global audience via your Web site. Voila: you've just become a TV station. So has everyone else on the Internet. ■

Jim Carroll is the co-author of *From Light Bulbs to Yottabits: How to Profit By Understanding the Internet of 2005*, released in October, 1999.

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in air pressure.

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waste it on air.



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